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The comparison of parental involvement for German language learning and the academic success of the students

Eda Ustunel*

Department of English Teaching, Cyprus International University, Lefkosa, Mersin 10, Turkey

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Abstract

The paper discusses the relationship between parental involvement in English language teacher trainees' learning German as a second foreign language and trainees' academic success in German. To this end, a questionnaire, which examines the types of direct (language learning advisors and coercers) and indirect parental strategies (language learning advocates and facilitators), is applied to 21 trainees. Following the biographical method in data collection process, the participants are asked to elaborate more on the types of strategies. The findings about the types of parental strategies are interrelated to the participants' overall term grades in German language that they have achieved in three academic semesters.

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Keywords: Teaching German as a foreign language; English language teacher trainees; language learning strategies; parental involvement; sociocultural theory.

1. Introduction

Educational research on family factors in students' academic development supports parental involvement as a sound educational strategy in enhancing students' academic achievement in various subjects (Wang, 2004; Gonzalez-DeHass *et al.*, 2005; Hung & Marjoribanks, 2005; Spera, 2005). In language learning research, parental involvement is commonly considered to contribute to learners' language learning and Turkish parents are often closely involved in their children's second or foreign language learning (Alakuş, 1998; Alptekin, 1998; Kilimci, 1998; Belge, 1998; Ustunel, 2008). Recent educational initiatives in Turkey suggest that learners' competence in language learning has been recognized as an important objective in the new curriculum for secondary school learners (Demirel, 1999, p. 27). However, little research has explored the issue of how parents participate in Turkish students' second foreign language learning in higher education.

The reason why parental involvement has not become an important research issue in relation to foreign language learners' development is possibly because language learning research in the past has relied heavily on cognitive theories (Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). It also seems to have been associated with the

* Eda Ustunel. Tel.: +0-392-671 2718
E-mail address: eda.ustunel@gmail.com

assumption that foreign language learners' development as language learners is largely language teachers' responsibility. The advent of a sociocultural approach in language learning research provides the theoretical underpinning for such an enquiry on parental involvement since it emphasizes the importance of historical, cultural, and social contexts of language learning in research (Wenden, 1998; Palfreyman, 2003a; Gao, 2006a). For sociocultural researchers, language learning and language learner development is a socialization process mediated by various social agents in contexts where language learning occurs (Palfreyman, 2003b; Thorne, 2005; Gao, 2006a). Language learning happens 'in family, community, workplace, and classroom' (Watson-Gegeo, 2004, p. 340). Therefore; Palfreyman (2003b, p. 247) recommends researchers to explore the issue of learner development by addressing the question, 'How do learners' strategies and representations interact with social mediation by teachers, fellow learners, and others?'. This paper focuses on 'others', who are language learners' parents and other family members and their strategies to support the participants' learning German as a second foreign language. Thus, the aim of this paper is to find out what types of direct and indirect language learning strategies 'others' use to support trainees' second foreign language learning at the tertiary level.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research participants

The enquiry involves 21 English language teacher trainees at their 4th year of undergraduate study. All participants are native speakers of Turkish and advanced English language users. They have chosen German as a second foreign language to meet the curricular requirements. They have all taken German as a second foreign language course for the first time. The participants have to pass a mid-term and a final written exam in German in order to be successful at the course. The participants have to take 60 out of 100 as the overall term grade. All 21 participants fulfil this requirement.

2.2. Data collection procedures

A questionnaire is applied to the trainees about their parents' strategy use in their second foreign language learning experience. The questionnaire is adapted from Gao's article. The biographical method, where language learners' retrospective accounts of their experiences are collected and analyzed, has been gaining currency in language learning research. Many researchers (Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Palfreyman, 2003b; Benson, 2005) have found this method helpful in capturing learners' voices and enhancing our understanding of what they really experience. The questionnaire consists of ten statements defining some direct and indirect strategy use. The participants have written whether they agree or disagree with the statements and commented on how that particular parental strategy use affects their choice of the second foreign language learning. The questionnaires are applied and collected consecutively.

2.3. Data analysis

Each strategy use, stated in the questionnaires, is calculated and frequencies are included. Trainees' personal comments on their parents' strategy use are broadly classified into two categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the first category, the participants describe how their family members are involved in their second foreign language learning and have an indirect impact on their development as language learners (for similar results see: Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Sung & Padilla, 1998; Pang & Watkins, 2000; Gao, 2006b). In the second category, parental involvement is shown to have direct effects on language learning and strategy use.

3. Research Findings

Table 1. The Overall Term Grades of Trainees in German Language Course

Overall Term Grades	AA	BA	BB	CB	CC	DC	DD
German I	15 trainees	1 trainee	3 trainees	2 trainees			
German II	11 trainees	2 trainees	1 trainee	3 trainees	2 trainees	1 trainee	1 trainee
German III	6 trainees		6 trainees	3 trainees	3 trainees		3 trainees

Table 1 shows the academic success of 21 trainees in German language course during 3 academic semesters. In German I, 71% of all trainees get the highest score (AA). In German II, the score range is expanded from CB to DD. Still more than half of the trainees (52%) receive the highest score (AA). For German III, the distribution of scores is equal for AA and BB (29% each) and for CB, CC, and the lowest score DD (14% each). Despite the varying scores, Table 1 shows that none of the trainees fail in any of the three German language courses.

Table 2. Parental Involvement in Trainees' Learning German as a Second Foreign Language

Parents As:	Agree	Disagree
<i>Language Learning Advocates</i>		
Had exerted profound influences on your second foreign language learning attitudes and motivations.	25 trainees 43%	33 trainees 57%
Had highlighted the critical importance of the second foreign language learning to your future career.	18 trainees 31%	40 trainees 69%
Had acted as role models due to their familiarities with target communities and cultures.	10 trainees 17%	48 trainees 83%
<i>Language Learning Advisors</i>		
Had started teaching the second foreign language and how to learn it when you were young.	2 trainees 3%	56 trainees 97%
Had kept up to date about recent developments in the second foreign language learning and teaching it.	3 trainees 5%	55 trainees 95%
<i>Language Learning Facilitators</i>		
Had forced you to develop certain strategies out of your conviction about second foreign language learning.	6 trainees 10%	52 trainees 90%
<i>Language Learning Coercers</i>		
Had closely involved themselves in your second foreign language learning by being with you.	16 trainees 28%	42 trainees 72%
Had induced changes in your strategy use and the adoption of certain language learning beliefs.	7 trainees 12%	51 trainees 88%
Had played recordings in the second foreign language.	12 trainees 21%	46 trainees 79%
Had encouraged you to speak the second foreign language before learning to write it.	6 trainees 10%	52 trainees 90%

The findings on the participants' parental involvement indicate what strategies their parents used to develop the participants into effective foreign language learners. The mostly used parental strategy is to exert profound influence on participants' second foreign language learning attitudes and motivations (43%). This finding suggests that parental influence on the second foreign language learning attitudes and motivations may have left marks on the

participants' strategy use and learning beliefs, which are crucial to learner development (Wenden, 1998; 2002). The second highest parental strategy use is to highlight the critical importance of the second foreign language learning to participants' future career (31%). This parental strategy use may show a deep impact on English language teacher trainees' second foreign language learning attitude and motivation (Belge, 1998).

The least used parental strategy is to start teaching the second foreign language and how to learn it when the participants were young (%3). The second least used parental strategy is to keep up to date about recent developments in the second foreign language learning and teaching it (5%). These findings mean that these Turkish parents are willing to be much more proactive in the participants' second foreign language learning (i.e., by applying the two highest-scored strategies) than a 'we provide and you learn' approach, regardless of their linguistic and pedagogic knowledge (see: Gao, 2006b for similar results).

Table 3. Trainees' Academic Success in German Language Courses and Their Parents' Strategy Use

Trainee	Parental Strategy Use	Academic Success
1	Language Learning Facilitators	German I-AA, German II-BA, German III-BB
2	Language Learning Advocates	German I-BA, German II-CC, German III-DD
3	Language Learning Advocates	German I-AA, German II-AA, German III-BB
4	Language Learning Advocates	German I-AA, German II-CB, German III-BB
5	Language Learning Advocates	German I-AA, German II-AA, German III-AA
6	Language Learning Advocates	German I-AA, German II-AA, German III-AA
7	Language Learning Advocates, Facilitators, Coercers	German I-BB, German II-CB, German III-DD
8	Language Learning Advocates, Facilitators, Coercers	German I-CB, German II-BB, German III-CC
9	Language Learning Advocates, Advisors, Facilitators, Coercers	German I-AA, German II-CB, German III-CC
10	Language Learning Coercers	German I-AA, German II-AA, German III-CB
11	Language Learning Advocates, Coercers	German I-AA, German II-AA, German III-AA
12	Language Learning Advocates, Coercers	German I-AA, German II-AA, German III-AA
13	Language Learning Advocates, Coercers	German I-CB, German II-DD, German III-DD
14	Language Learning Advocates, Coercers	German I-AA, German II-BA, German III-AA
15	Language Learning Advocates, Coercers	German I-AA, German II-BA, German III-BB
16	Language Learning Advocates, Advisors, Coercers	German I-AA, German II-AA, German III-AA
17	Language Learning Advocates	German I-AA, German II-AA, German III-CB
18	Language Learning Advocates, Coercers	German I-AA, German II-AA, German III-BB
19	Language Learning Advocates, Coercers	German I-AA, German II-AA, German III-BB
20	Language Learning Advocates	German I-BB, German II-CB, German III-CB
21	Language Learning Advocates, Coercers	German I-BB, German II-CC, German III-CC

Table 3 reveals that there is no direct relationship between the number of parental strategy use and the trainee's academic success. For example, Trainee 9 states that his/her parents are involved in his/her learning German as a second foreign language by applying both direct and indirect strategies. However, his/her academic success in German language courses neither remain the same nor improve in 3 academic semesters. Trainee 4 may be another example to clear the situation. The parents of Trainee 4 involve in his/her learning German as a second foreign language by using only one strategy. However, his/her academic success has improved in German III compared to his/her overall term grades of German I and German II.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that the parents have had varying degrees of influence on trainees' development as second foreign language learners. The parents and family members have been indirectly involved in the participants' second language learning mostly as language learning advocates. They highlighted the critical importance of the second foreign language learning to trainee's future career by pointing out the need to learn foreign languages to hold a strong CV and for self-development. As suggestions for further involvement as advocates, parents should keep track of trainees' grades and mention that Turkey is a touristic country, thus; it is better for trainees to learn as many foreign languages as they can. Parents and family members have also been directly involved in trainees' second language learning mostly as language learning coercers. They had closely involved themselves in the second foreign language learning process by requesting the trainees to teach them the target language at home and collaborating with other social agents such as other relatives, who have first-hand experience of the target second foreign language. As suggestions for further involvement as coercers, parents should frequently ask for clarification about German vocabulary, watch German TV channels with trainees and initiate to find a job to the trainees in the tourism sector in order them to practice the second foreign language. In indirect ways, these family figures propel the participants to learn a foreign language in addition to English. As language learning facilitators, they should also encourage trainees to develop certain strategies such as jotting down new vocabularies in alphabetical order, consulting on vocabulary teaching software programmes and using foreign language learning kits (i.e., study and workbooks, cassettes, CDs, DVDs, dictionary, picture dictionary, graded storybooks). As language learning advisors, parents should keep up to date about recent developments in the second foreign language learning and encourage the second language learning when trainees are young.

The most surprising result emerging from the analysis is that there is no clear relationship between the number of parental strategy use and trainees' academic success in learning German as a second foreign language. That is, it is not true to assume that the trainee, whose parents are involved in his/her learning German as a second foreign language by applying the highest number of strategies, has the highest academic success.

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